



PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS OF NEL NODDINGS ON SUPPORTING CRITICAL THINKING IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Dr. Shalini Yadava

Assistant Professor, School of Education, GGSIP University, Dwarka Campus, New Delhi.

ABSTRACT

We as teachers and teacher educators are the first to critique the practice of rote memorization which we find our students indulging in. However we seldom care to look into the causes of the same. We hardly reflect upon our own classroom practices as teachers. In order to nurture a thinking individual it is imperative that we provide ample opportunities in the classrooms and outside to engage in meaningful conversations, create an environment to raise questions fearlessly, motivate students to reflect on their own experiences and above all let dialogue on critical burning issues be important part of classroom discourses. Nel Noddings is an American Feminist Philosopher who has written extensively on Care Ethics, Happiness and Education, Peace Education, Critical thinking etc. This paper is an attempt to analyse the writings of Noddings on Critical thinking in order to cull out educational implications in the form of strategies which may be adopted by us teachers to nurture students who are critical thinkers.

KEYWORDS: Critical Thinking, Reflection, Moral Commitment.

INTRODUCTION:

Every single day those of us teaching in schools and colleges across the country see a worrying and disturbing trend. On one hand classrooms whether in schools or at the higher education level are far from any engagement in critical pedagogy and on the other hand you hardly find students questioning teachers on issues or on their ideas. Neither do you find teachers ask many a thought provoking questions to ponder upon thus making both the teacher and taught very comfortable in their respective spaces. This comfort however is very distressing if the aim is to develop a critically thinking mind. On Critical thinking Noddings looks at the dichotomy which exists in educational discourses in the classrooms. On one hand we see educators repeatedly talking of creating a democratic environment in their classrooms and outside and on the other hand you are forbidden from touching critical and delicate areas such as Sexuality, Religion, Caste, Marginalisation, History of Wars etc in your educational discourses. Noddings points out that for critical thinking to be nurtured and developed it is important to question the established beliefs and norms whether social, scientific, economic or political. But about what we see in classrooms as a practice of critical thinking is teachers raising questions and students trying or struggling to answer them. Well that is just the tip of the iceberg. Critical thinking involves the judicious use of reason for questioning anything around you be it beliefs, rules, customs, traditions, policies etc. She makes a strong case for creating an academic space where difficult and often uncomfortable questions are not only raised but are respected and answered with utmost zeal. However in most institutions you find there is very limited space for argumentation and critical thinking. Both are being used restrictedly only in the subject domains of Science and Mathematics.

Before we start understanding the dynamics of cultivation of critical thinking from the ideas put forth by Noddings it is important to understand the meaning of this term.

Understanding the Meaning of Critical Thinking:

"Critical Thinking is essential as a tool of inquiry. As such, Critical Thinking is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life. While not synonymous with good thinking, Critical Thinking is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon. The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit." (American Philosophical Association, "Consensus Statement Regarding Critical Thinking," 1990, retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-critical-thinking-1689811>).

Most of us have been subjected as students to rigorous mugging of facts most often in History, Biology and Language classrooms whether it was the dates or names or biographic details actually making us either hate the subject in the long run or forget the content after some time. On top of it there are certain subjects which are generally perceived to be the cradles for the development of intellect which include Mathematics and Physics chiefly. However research has given us enough fodder to dispute this and prove this perception otherwise. Let us now try to examine the strategies which may be employed to develop critical thinking in students such that they are able to have a better understanding of life as a whole.

Inculcating the Practice of Critical Thinking in Students:

- a) **Learning as an Exploration:** Noddings believes that for critical thinking to develop you need to engage in learning as an exploration. For exploration to begin it is important to throw questions at students which shall provoke them to read, find, write, reason, analyse and infer about the themes or concepts or phenomena under discussion. For example after the recitation of a poem instead of the teacher giving out the meanings of words we may ask students to find the same and put across questions such as What is the intent of the poem in question? How does the poem inspire you? And then seek their interpretations of the poem. This may finally be followed by asking students to write a short poem of their own. Similarly when teaching sexual reproduction in Biology in a classroom in India we need to throw open questions on HIV/AIDs and the need for practicing contraception for controlling our ever growing booming population.
- b) **Modeling Critical Thinking:** Another problem is we do not acknowledge that for inculcating the skill for critical thinking we also need teachers who model that behavior. We need teachers who may spontaneously engage in finding a solution to a given problem in their own ingenious way. For example the sociological and political and economic analysis of the Crisis faced by the Rohingyas in fleeing Myanmar towards Bangladesh and India, in a Human rights class must be undertaken in order to engage students in finding about the history of this issue, the reasons underlying the crisis and the solutions which may lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Brainstorming on critical issues and also on uncomfortable issues is important in order to fire the neurons of both the teachers and students.
- c) **Reflective Practices in Curriculum:** It is important for teachers and teacher educators to engage students on reflecting on their own experiences. We may have half an hour of engagement each day in educational institutions at the end of the day wherein students reflect upon their learning of the day, their behavior towards peers and teachers, the fears and anxieties they experienced, the actions and words that inspired them etc. This may be done by asking them to write a reflective journal and thus look at their journey with a critical lens.
- d) **Critical thinking and Moral Commitment:** Noddings also raises a very sensitive issue surrounding critical thinking with respect to moral commitment. She adds that when advertisers dupe customers through false claims, when lawyers defend their clients fabricating evidence or misusing the loopholes, when clients are fleeced in the name of business and when saints mislead their followers etc we know for sure that a lot of critical thinking has gone into maneuvering facts but we also know that morality in all the above cases is questionable. Therefore it is also important to understand that critical thinking may not always lead to moral action. Therefore what we need is to apply critical and logical thinking in the realm of care such that we teach our students to empathise for sure.

In conclusion we need to understand that catering to the affective domain of learners is not an easy task but a journey that is worthwhile and very satisfying in the long run. Noddings also motivates us to engage in conversations with students on moral fundamentals of knowledge such that they understand that to cheat and plagiarise is unethical and feel responsible enough not to indulge in these practices as harsher punishments or penalties are just short term measures

which may not act as a deterrent in the long run. We also need to understand that what exactly are we educating our students for. And in doing so we shall have to decide upon the priorities. Looking at the present state of affairs across schools and universities it is amply clear that our focus is only on academic scores and this fuels fierce competition between students. Most of the institutions hold the teachers responsible for the student scores making it a catch 22 situation for them to deal with. We continuously engage in evaluating students in comparison to their peers and thus the spirit of cooperation amongst them is difficult to nurture. It is also seen at the senior secondary stage and higher education that students stand at crossroads often unable to decide on what exactly they want to pursue in their future course of studies. The reason for students being in a quandary is the curriculum does not support them to find for themselves what they actually want to learn or are interested in. We do not have the institutions equipped with the necessary personal and career guidance services through which students may find out their aptitude in their stream of choice. Noddings also makes a case that a education system may be considered student friendly if it allows students to explore their subjects and specializations of interest i.e a student should have the choice to opt for a set of specializations and change them year to year. On the other hand what we are doing is assessing students on tasks in which they have no interest. We need to have a curriculum which nurtures individual talents, capacities and propensities such that we cater to the mind, body and spirit in the real sense. Therefore to nurture a critical thinking mind and a caring heart in students we shall have to have curricular inputs in the form of textual materials, activities and engagement which ensures:

- A climate in the classroom that is fearless
- Unconditional Love and trust are nurtured
- Each individual listens to the other receptively
- Questions on diverse issues are raised and their answers discussed
- Care is the underlying value of all relationships
- Students are not compared to each other
- Teachers are free from any biases and prejudices
- Teachers are not judgemental of their students
- Opportunities to learn are distributed equitably
- Diversity in all forms is respected
- Cooperation and not competition motivates students
- Understanding the key to the happiness of all is the foremost aim of education
- Self understanding is an onward journey
- Individual differences are perceived to be strengths
- Education teaches respect for all vocations and professions in the world of work
- Critical thinking enables students to discover new truths
- Peace and happiness are the hallmarks of a good education
- Democratic citizenship values are inculcated
- Human rights are taught and upheld
- Moral values are lived in model behavior of teachers for students to imbibe
- Self discipline nurtures the spirit of harmony
- Knowledge sharing is encouraged
- Cooperative and collaborative Learning opportunities are provided

The above listed attributes in a class make the journey of education not only joyful for both the teacher and taught but also a worthwhile one. However the question remains- How do we achieve it? It seems to be a tall order but on a closer look one finds that if you really care for your pupils you would ensure that all the above attributes define your class. All it needs on the part of the teacher is to engage in an pedagogy that is constructivist and is based on the strategies provided by Noddings and other care theorists.

REFERENCES:

1. Noddings, N. (2008). All Our Students Thinking. *Educational Leadership*, 65(5), 8-13. Retrieved July 17, 2017.
2. Noddings, N. (2010). Moral Education and Caring. *Theory and Research in Education*, 8(2), 145-151. doi:DOI: 10.1177/1477878510368617
3. Noddings, N. (2010). Complexity in Caring and Empathy. *Abstracts*, (V), 6-12. Retrieved July 17, 2017.
4. Noddings, N. (2015). Critical Thinking. *Journal of Educational Controversy*, 10(1), 1st ser., 1-10. Retrieved July 19, 2017, from <http://cedar.www.edu/jec/vol10/iss1/1>